# Monitoring and evaluating eco-localisation: lessons from UK low carbon community groups


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## Abstract

In the UK 'low carbon' community groups and partnerships (LCCGPs) have flourished in recent years, with sectors such as community energy receiving increased national policy attention. Whilst such attention aligns LCCGPs with agendas such as 'New Localism' and climate change mitigation, other modes of local socio-environmental change are advocated and enacted under a broad rubric of 'eco-localisation'. Across the political and ideological spectrum however, there is growing interest in how LCCGPs understand and evaluate their impacts, with questions arising about what indicators, processes and tools are most pertinent and rigorous. In response, this paper draws on a knowledge exchange project that explored and trialled monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools amongst a sample of UK LCCGPs in conjunction with groups and networks operating in an eco-localisation vein. Project findings highlight the positive effects that flexible and relevant M&E has on groups and networks. It also draws attention to the need for on-going support and facilitation for those undertaking M&E: vital if the burgeoning 'impact agenda'—whether emerging from central funders or 'eco-localist' networks themselves—does not over-burden or dishearten groups, thus causing the opposite effects of tools and processes meant to facilitate sustained and shared thinking, learning and action.


## Introduction

Community-led initiatives that aim to create positive socio-environmental change at a local level have been growing in numbers of late. There are reported to be over 500 UK-based community energy groups in the UK alone (Department of Energy and Climate

Change, 2014), while internationally groups belonging to the 'Transition Initiatives' network (originally called Transition Towns) for example currently stands at approximately 480 (see https://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/by-number). Invariably, such low carbon community groups and partnerships (LCCGPs) display considerable diversity in their locations, aims, activities, composition, longevity and outcomes (Seyfang et al., 2013). Researchers and practitioners have in response been exploring who gets involved in such groups, why, and to what ends (e.g. Aiken, 2014; Bomberg and McEwan, 2012; Bristow et al., 2012; Heiskanen et al., 2010; North and Longhurst, 2013; Walker et al., 2010).

Researchers and practitioners have also analysed and debated the rationales and means by which LCCGPs are brought into national policy goals and interventions. For example, in 2014 the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) launched their 'Community Energy Strategy', which aims to encourage 'existing groups to grow and to inspire more to set up and expand' and 'to tap into the enthusiasm and commitment that's so evident in community groups across the country' (DECC, 2014: 3). Such aims are without doubt instrumental and pragmatic given UK's greenhouse gas emission reduction targets under the Climate Change Act (i.e. 80% reduction from a 1990 baseline by 2050). But the forms, modes and underlying imperatives of ensuing policy interventions—and indeed, the ideological basis for making these groups 'objects of governance' (Cohen and McCarthy, 2015)—are less self-evident. Commentary around this governance trend has focused on the logics, outcomes and impacts of related policy interventions, as well as what is missing from current policy agendas (Green Alliance, 2011; Rae and Bradley, 2012). In addition, attention has been drawn to the underlying interpretations of 'the local' and 'communities' within prevailing governance regimes (Bradley, 2014; Catney et al., 2014; Department for Communities and Local Government,

2015; Devine-Wright and Wiersma, 2013). For example, the much debated iteration of 'New Localism' promoted and enacted by the UK Government stands in contrast to other forms of localisation, wherein 'the local' is less of a site of service delivery and more one of generative and 'progressive' politics (see Featherstone et al., 2012; North, 2010).

One component of these debates concerns how best to conceptualise, capture and measure the impacts of LCCGPs, on their communities and on broader regimes and systems (Cameron and Hicks, 2014; Hamilton, 2013; Hobson et al., 2014; Seyfang et al., 2014). National policy makers assert that LCCGPs should contribute to the creation of a rigorous 'evidence base' (*ibid.* 2014: 45) to, for example, illustrate their viability for future funding applications and to guide future national policy directions. By contrast LCCGPS, their intermediaries, and some researchers argue that any form of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) should first and foremost contribute to the current needs, skills and direction of place-based groups through appropriate 'life-long' learning approaches (Forrest and Wiek, 2014; Franklin et al., 2011).

This paper aims to engage with and contribute to these debates, by discussing a knowledge exchange project that created relevant M&E processes and tools for and with a sample of UK LCCGPs. Drawing on previous knowledge exchange and action research (e.g. Hamilton, 2013) and participatory monitoring and evaluation methodologies (Coe and Mayne, 2008)—while partnering with key UK-based intermediary networks (see below)—the project created a suite of pertinent indicators and M&E tools through iterative consultation with key practitioners and groups. It then worked with a self-selected sample of 20 groups as they created their own M&E plans, and trialled a selection of tools, collecting data on the process and experiences of participating LCCGPs.

This process and the underpinning project rationale arose out of a reported lack of, and need for, M&E within LCCGPs by groups themselves, their intermediary networks and researchers (e.g. Seyfang et al., 2014) and policy makers (DECC, 2014). However, as noted above, what different actors think constitutes valid and valuable measures of impact, captured through M&E, is an open question. This project therefore sought to explore which forms of M&E are deemed by LCCGPs and their related networks as productive and feasible, both from a practical perspective, and in consideration of the roles and expectations of LCCGPs within extant governance landscapes. In this sense, it aimed to examine what, if anything, the 'doing' of M&E *in situ* can illuminate about different approaches to localism and localisation, and their implications for current and future trajectories for LLCGPs and networks.

This paper begins by outlining ongoing debates about the roles that LCCGPs can and do have in broader governance regimes, with specific reference to the growing focus on calculating and proving positive socio-environmental impacts. It then outlines the aims and processes of the M&E knowledge exchange project. The following sections focus on positive outcomes and challenges reported by groups undertaking the M&E trials, underscoring the need for flexibility within the tools and processes. Also highlighted is the need for ongoing support and facilitation, to enable groups to continue their shared learning and to feed this learning into future projects and activities, with reference to their broader aims of fostering positive socio-environmental change in their communities and beyond.

## Governing localism and localisation: rationalities, mechanisms and measuring impact

The 'local' as a scale of overt governmental intervention has to date been discussed extensively by researchers, who detail myriad ways that 'national' policy agendas for example are inextricably linked to governance at meso- and micro scales (Bradley, 2014; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). Of late the UK Government's much-lauded decentralization 'New Localism' agenda has drawn fresh attention to these issues, sparking a fresh round of debate about sites and modes of governance. For example, the current UK Prime Minister David Cameron has asserted that the 'empowerment' of citizens and communities is:

> 'absolutely essential to our economic, social and political future. If our local economies are vibrant and strong we are far less vulnerable to global shocks or the failures of a few dominant industries. If people know that their actions can make a real difference to their local communities, they're far more motivated to get involved - and civic pride is revived.' (Cameron, 2009: no page).

Such statements—whilst being far from novel political rhetoric—have been followed up by legislation, most notably the 2011 Localism Act. This Act aimed to transfer certain powers (e.g. service priorities and provision) from central government to local councils and communities (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013; Stanton, 2014), invariably drawing both praise and critique. Some argue there has been failure to transfer the necessary powers and resources after this Act, to allow local institutions to take meaningful action. Others have questioned the political legitimacy of local institutions to make said decisions, plus the unequal distribution of positive and negative impacts (Catney et al., 2014; Connelly, 2011; Padley, 2013). Indeed, for some this form of 'New Localism' represents attempts to

transform an array of community groups into 'flexible, low cost service providers that buttress neo-liberalising strategies' (Catney et al., 2014: 717): strategies that include public spending cuts and involvement of the private sector in delivering public goods, which arguably can have the opposite effect of creating 'vibrant and strong' (ibid.) communities.

Although not explicitly tied to the Localism Act—and with central government funding available before the 2011 Act (see Walker et al., 2010)—the further enrolment of LCCGPs into inter/national agendas can be argued as part of these governance trends. The UK Coalition Government asserted that community energy groups have a part to play in 'the global race to decarbonise our society' (DECC, 2014: 3), making contributions to energy security, low carbon transitions, 'green growth and green jobs' (DECC, 2015: 5), whilst at the same time 'helping people struggling with energy bills' (*ibid.* 2014: 3). As such, 'community', and in particular LCCGPs, are conceptualised as the site and collective where such disparate agendas can and should coalesce (Aiken 2014; Bradley 2014) undergirded by a 'neo-communitarian discourse of local participation and empowerment' (Walker and Cass, 2007: 461). This approach thus assumes that local (energy or low carbon) projects create increased control over, and thus more locally appropriate, energy demand and supply management projects, which is turn minimize inter-community conflict enabling more benefits to accrue to local residents (Mulugetta et al., 2010).

Such 'win win' assumptions belie the contingencies, diversities and limitations of LCCGPs, as highlighted by existing research (Middlemiss, 2011; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). For one, it fails to acknowledge the 'fractures and disputes' (Walker et al., 2010: 2662) that community-led projects can create, which includes questions of who benefits the most from particular interventions (Bristow et al., 2012; Franklin and Marsden, 2014). In

addition, the current central government ethos—of funding LCCGPS to act as replicable 'test-beds' (DECC, 2012: 2) for future interventions—has been argued as misplaced. For example, in their discussion paper 'Mass Localism' (Bunt and Harris, 2010 ) the charity Nesta questioned the underlying premise the Department of Energy and Climate Change's Low Carbon Community Challenge (LCCC)[1], which they argue assumed that:

> 'localism is in effect a testing-ground for ideas that can subsequently be scaled up at a national level, a kind of R&D lab for public sector practice' (Bunt and Harris, 2010: 29).

One central component of this 'public sector lab' approach is the collection and collation of impact evidence, where LCCGPs must 'demonstrate their effectiveness, financial sustainability and wider social benefits to secure investment' (DECC, 2014: 45). This imperative is in part a reaction to the somewhat sparse and/or varied evaluations of LCCGPs impact, including research that suggest their presence does not always foster community-wide shifts in attitudes and/or behaviours beyond groups' immediate participants (Middlemiss, 2011; Rogers et al., 2012). But it is also part of an arguably calculative approach to LCCGPs, where they are charged with piloting a series of small-scale projects that are systematically evaluated and then rolled out in other places and communities via a 'test bed' approach to learning and replicability (DECC, 2012; Bunt and Harris, 2010).

A contrasting (but not mutually exclusive) model of local action and impact comes under a broad banner of localisation. Here authority, resources and self-determination around key facets of society—including the economy—are returned to and fostered within

[1] This was a £10 million funding programme that ran from 2010-12, which provided capital grant and one year project management funding to 22 selected communities, chosen from a competitive bidding process. Those groups receiving funding undertook projects such as installing low carbon technologies and/or community engagement and education programmes.

particular localities (Hines, 2003). For example, in reference to the concept of 'eco-localisation' North (2010: 586) argues that:

> advocates of intentional localisation are developing radical new conceptions of livelihood and economy that directly cut against the logic of growth-based capitalist economic strategies and elite conceptualisations that 'we all know' that trade liberalisation leads to wealth while barriers limit growth

One such attempt at enacting the above is arguably seen in the work of the Transition movement. With its starting point and intermediary hub Transition Network (TN) situated in the Devon town of Totnes, it works through independent but 'signed up' groups around the world following a Transition model—or rather, a staged recipe of key 'ingredients' (see https://www.transitionnetwork.org/ingredients). Overall, Transition aims to encourage and foster locally relevant responses to climate change and 'peak oil' including community gardens, local food social enterprises or cooperatives, and community film / debate nights. Transition thus aims to address global imperatives (such as climate change and peak oil) 'while remaining engaged with the contingencies and specificities of local contexts, concerns and capabilities' (Ireland and McKinnon, 2013: 159). As such, TN focuses more on the stages of building a successful Transition Initiative (TI) than prescribing actual activities and outcomes (see https://www.transitionnetwork.org/ingredients). In contrast to the DECC approach mentioned above, any form of project replication here is loose, with an emphasis on TIs sharing experiences and learning via the Transition Network website, training and workshops / conferences.

Such an approach to enacting a particular form of eco-localisation has been subject to both positive appraisal and critique (Aiken, 2014; Connors and McDonald, 2010; Neal,

2013; Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2012). Some argue that the movement's ethos of 'The power of just doing stuff' (Hopkins, 2013 ) creates pragmatic and at times apolitical stances and outcome (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). That is, it can result in 'the occlusion of the plurality of possible strategies and projects' because the 'democratic debate that is needed' is side-lined by more instrumental imperatives (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014: 173). Such assertions themselves are however open to debate, depending upon how understands and identifies 'democratic debate' and indeed politics per se. That is, TIs may indeed appear apolitical if one defines politics the presence of overtly oppositional movements and activities (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2010). However, for some 'Transitioners' and indeed academics (Cameron and Hicks, 2014) the act and intervention of 'just doing stuff'—and doing it differently from current practices, often in small scale and subtle ways—is part of a broader and longer term political project that aims to recalibrate inequitable and environmentally ruinous systems, echoing North's point about 'radical new conceptions of livelihood and economy' (ibid.) whilst not prescribing how these conceptions are played out on the ground.

Although many forms of LCCGPs exist other than Transition, the above debates about and within TN and TIs were central to the knowledge exchange project discussed herein. That is, parallel but antithetical to DECC's concern about LCCGPS impacts TN have in recent years been questioning how their own particular approach to eco-localisation can enable them to become, and legitimately claim to be, a movement creating positive change in town and cities around the world. In short, how does one take the measure of a diverse and dispersed collective, in ways that support their affect and sustainability?

## Monitoring and Evaluation for LCCGPs: process and methods

As noted above, the intermediary network TN is based in the original 'Transition Town' of Totnes, Devon. It is a charitable organisation that employs 10 (mostly part time) staff, and aims to

> 'inspire, encourage, connect, support and train communities as they self-organise around the Transition model, creating initiatives that rebuild resilience and reduce CO2 emissions' (https://www.transitionnetwork.org/about)

TN were partners[2] in the M&E project discussed here, along with the Low Carbon Communities Network, which aims to encourage, enable and support diverse communities and institutions in adopting low or zero carbon technologies and lifestyles (see http://www.lowcarboncommunities.org/about/aims). Both organisations, in the run-up to this project, were debating and working through how to account for and collect information on their groups' impacts. Both networks had previously surveyed their members to find out about their progress and activities. And TN, in conjunction with the Transition Research Network (TRN: see http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org), had developed TI-specific M&E, identifying a range of possible indicators for evaluating Transition projects. TN and TRN had also convened a series of workshops—1 of which was attended by all 3 authors of this paper—to debate underlying assumptions that Transition concepts and projects can contain about how change happens, and thus how best to evaluate and learn from it (see http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org/theory-of-change-tour.html).

[2] In this context, we use the term 'partner' here to denote a collaborative working relationship, which included the project funding paying for a set number of days of each network members' time. This amounted to 1 day per week of funding for TN and 10 days in total for LCCN.

Thus, given the above history and existing working relationships between some of this papers' authors and these networks, the overall intention of this project was to further develop and test an evaluation framework that enabled LCCGPs to undertake relevant and meaningful learning processes via M&E. The intention was to trial M&E that facilitated both first-order (i.e. facts and data) and second-order learning, with the latter being where 'long term goals, purpose and strategy are re-evaluated' (Forrest and Wiek, 2014: 85) through the fostering of relevant skills and competencies (Franklin et al., 2011).

To this end, 'Monitoring and Evaluation for Sustainable Communities' was a 12-month knowledge exchange project, and collaboration between researchers, TN, LCCN and a self-selected sample of UK LCCGPs. The aim of this project was not to collect and analyse M&E data per se. Rather, it was to explore what happens when groups are given the space, resources and tools to do so themselves, in-keeping with calls for 'a more holistic evaluative frame' when examining the impacts of community groups (Walker and Cass, 2007: 78). The central ethos was of the project was therefore to facilitate a process of close and co-productive working, as well as knowledge and information sharing, and cumulative learning for all those involved. It builds upon positive interpretations of the rise of university-based 'knowledge exchange' and impact agendas (North, 2013), whilst being mindful of their many challenges (Rogers et al., 2014; Wynne-Jones et al., 2015).

To achieve this, the project first off aimed to reach some consensus on a set of common, tangible and feasible indicators to collect data on: ones that were of interest and relevance to groups, intermediaries, external donors and stakeholders (Reed and Bruyneel, 2010). To this end, we consulted with the project partners, a wide range of M&E practitioners, relevant intermediary organisations and prominent LCCGPs to draw up a short-list of indicators, which in this case focussed on energy and food projects. These

indicators were then assessed against existing M&E tools relevant to LCCGPs, and where the extant tools were deemed unsuitable, they were either re-developed or new ones created. Table 1 outlines the names of the M&E tools, their origins and purpose, as well as the number of groups that trialled them. The indicators short-list and tools were then sent back to those originally consulted, for further comment and refinement.

A call was then put out via various LCCGP networks and intermediary organisations for UK groups to participate in 1-day M&E workshops. The aim of the workshops were to facilitate participating groups (a) to discuss what M&E can bring to their projects and activities; (b) to begin to construct an M&E framework for one of their projects, based upon an existing 'step by step' guide (see Mayne et al 2014); (c) to start to build M&E capacity within groups; and (d) to get further feedback and comment on the suggested set of indicators and tools. In total, 33 people from 27 LCCGPs attended the 3 workshops held in Oxford, London and Manchester in early to mid-2014.

After the workshops, participants were contacted as a follow-up, to encourage them to stay engaged with project and participate in the trialling of the tools in their groups. In total, 20 groups agreed to participate in the subsequent M&E tools trials, which took place from June-October 2014. The ethics protocol for this project requires the anonymity of the specific groups. However, in general these groups were:

- 11 low carbon/energy community groups and partnerships
- 5 Transition Initiatives
- 4 groups with other focuses (e.g. food-based social enterprise)

A total of 18 groups were based in England, with 1 each from Scotland and Wales. In terms of their size and longevity, they ranged from well-established community energy groups

with several achieved and/on-going projects, to nascent and/or smaller groups with a modest membership and less mature projects.

Overall, the purpose of these trials was to explore what happens when participating groups start to work with particular forms of M&E, both in terms of the tools that explore how a group is functioning (e.g. Group Diagnostic) or those that collect information on specific impacts (e.g. Participant Survey). These trials were thus based on 'a situated-learning model, with the premise that learning takes place through engagement in specific social contexts' (Franklin et al., 2011): 352). That is, it is not until forms of M&E are tried, tested, and debated in situ, will their relevance to, and use-ability by, an array of groups become clearer.

To that end, each group was asked to trial at least 2 M&E tools and was allocated one project team member as support over the trial period in recognition that groups need 'more practical, bespoke and advanced levels of support' (DECC, 2012: 31). All tools were made available through a dedicated project website.

**Table 1: M&E tools: purpose and numbers trialed**

| Group functioning and sustainability tools | Purpose of tool | No. of trials |
|---|---|---|
| *Group Diagnostic Health Check (developed by TN)* | Participatory tool for use with core members, to help early stages of group formation and/or reflect on the changes in the group several years after establishment | 7 |
| *Roles and Responsibility Mapping (developed from EVALOC project[3])* | Participatory group exercise to help groups assess and monitor roles they and other organisations undertake locally on particular issues (e.g. household energy); to assess the strengths/limits of these roles; and to reflect on 'where next?' | 6 |

3 This project was 'Evaluating low carbon communities' and was funded by Research Councils UK. For more information on this project, see http://www.evaloc.org.uk.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Mapping Your Network (developed from UNLOC project[4])* | Assess and monitor who groups are working and interacting with, and why. Aims to help identify gaps and thus highlight who groups might benefit from building relationships with | 10 |
| *Timeline and Significant Change (developed from EVALOC)* | Help group core members track activities over time (e.g. 1 year) to reflect on underpinning rationale/strategy, external enabling or constraining factors, and associated outcomes or impacts (intended and unintended) | 2 |
| *Partnership Working (informed by previous work of researchers and EVALOC)* | Assess and monitor the value-added and health/functioning of formal partnerships or joint initiatives and collaborations | 2 |
| Impact/outcome tools | | |
| *Participant Survey (Question sets taken from various sources[5])* | Survey template to enable groups to monitor the views and actions of group/project participants beyond core group, to find out about broader interests, motivations and impacts | 10 |
| *Community Renewable Energy Survey (developed from EVALOC)* | Survey to investigate in/direct outcomes and/or impacts of community renewable projects on the wider community and stakeholders | 3 |
| *Community Impact Monitoring Tool[6]* | Online tool developed to automatically estimate some outcomes and impacts from project activities and events including carbon emissions, cost savings and waste diverted from landfill | 4 |
| *Equity and Cost Effectiveness Tools (developed by project team)* | To help groups and/or network coordinators to estimate and compare project costs with project benefits for an agreed set of common priority indicators | 1 |

Finally, once the above trials had ended, each participating group was asked to provide feedback on the process and tools. This feedback took two forms. The first was an online

4 This project was 'Understanding local and community governance of energy' and was funded by UKERC. For more information on this project, see http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/programmes/energy-demand/unloc-understanding-local-and-community-governance-of-energy.html

5 These sources included EVALOC; the Low Carbon Communities Network annual survey; and the evaluation carried out as part of the Department of Energy and Climate Change's 'low carbon communities challenge' funding programme.

6 This was developed by Resource Futures (see http://www.resourcefutures.co.uk) and Community Action Groups Oxfordshire (see http://www.cagoxfordshire.org.uk/impact-model).

and semi-structured questionnaire that asked for feedback about the tools trialled, which received 23 responses (i.e. for a few groups, more than 1 member replied). The second were semi-structured interviews, which asked a broader set of questions including reasons for participating in this project; positive and negative outcomes; and broader issues of LCCGP resourcing and governance. The interviews lasted on average 30 minutes, were recorded and then professionally transcribed for coding and analysis. A total of 15 interviews were carried out, with those not able to undertake a recorded interview providing written responses to questions over email.

The following discussion thus draws on a range of data from different stages of the project. This includes feedback and participant observation at the workshops; groups' responses to the questionnaire and interviews; interviews with participating intermediary networks; and comments made at an end-of-project meeting, attended by several participating LCCGPs members, some project advisory network members and all the project team (which was also recorded and transcribed).

## The 'so what?' of M&E: questioning change assumptions and honing conceptual toolkits

> '*We're so focussed on getting things done, and you know this yourself, that measuring an outcome is the bit that kind of always gets swept to the side'* (Interview 4)[7].

As the quote above outlines, for core members of participating groups there is a definite preference for 'doing' rather than measuring the outcomes of activities. This is not a new finding, given existing evidence that M&E is considered by LCCGPs as 'a box-ticking exercise, or an onerous activity' (Merritt and Stubbs, 2012): 101). A finding also already

7 All interviewees have been de-identified, thus direct quotes are given a number that simply indicates the order in which the interviews took place.

noted (e.g. Hobson et al., 2014) is that, despite concerns about the time and resources M&E demands, without it hard-won lessons are being lost from projects and groups, causing frustration for some. When considering the outcomes of a thermal imaging project that her group had previously undertaken, one participant noted that:

> '*They didn't really know how to reflect back on it, if you see what I mean, and take what they'd learnt. I mean we'll take what we learnt on but there was no… they just sort of do things. There's no monitoring and evaluation of what they're doing'* (Interview 13).

There was therefore a definite shortfall in groups' current abilities to capture lessons learnt from project and activities, in part due to skills and 'know how', but also due to a lack of time and direct incentive to do so.

Overall feedback about project participation was positive and constructive. As one participant put it, attending the workshop and then going through one of the M&E processes back in her group '*got us talking about stuff that we would never have talked about'* (Interview 1), which lead to group members learning about and from each other. As another commented, in reference to being prompted to discuss their underlying assumptions through the use of the Group Diagnostic tool:

> '*As soon as you start discussing concepts, you have to automatically discuss what they are and what they do and how relevant they are to you, and I think that was really great, because although they're really simple questions, actually from that it really helped expand the discussions. And I know from the meeting minutes that were produced, there was a lot of potential projects that had come up, which is great'* (Interview 13).

Indeed, the above quote highlights the importance of framing M&E as a suite of methods to help groups to '*clarify our vision*' (Interview 11) and test their 'theories of change' (Eyben et al., 2008). This enables groups to plan future projects in line with the desire to create specific impacts, rather than M&E being used to capture outcomes after-the-fact. As one interviewee put it:

> *'I still don't think the term M&E quite does it. It's not quite fit for purpose because it doesn't let you know you're going to have that experience and it's about learning and not being judged. I think the term evaluation is scary'*

As such, it is the broader goals and conversations that trialling the M&E tools stimulated that were considered as positive outcomes. As the TN staff member involved in this project throughout its 12 months put it, it had:

> *stimulated me to do some of the work that I've been wanting to do, like around theories of change because that was the first thing that confronted me when I started doing this project. It was 'so what's your theory of change and how are you going to fit the impacts and what you want to measure into that logic model'? And if you haven't thought about what's your theory of change, then you can't really… we're kind of going 'I'll measure that because that seems like a nice thing to do' but so what?*

And through having the space, time, stimulus and financial support to explore these 'so what?' questions, groups and networks were able to at least begin processes of 'second-order learning' (*ibid.*). This includes questioning expectations of what activities can achieve (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012), questioning the change assumptions underpinning activities, and indeed, what constitutes a valuable impact for that particular group.

Academics have long argued that the action research can help strengthen 'grassroots initiatives' by 'honing our conceptual toolkit' (Cameron and Hicks, 2014: 68) around questions of scale and impact. Arguably this assertion can be extended to researchers helping participant-partners have similar 'honing' experiences through supportive and participatory processes that encourage—but do not dictate or determine—greater group cohesion and clarity. As this interviewee explained, having worked in her group through one of the 'group functioning' tools:

> '*There's the people who want to do things and the people who are happy to sit around and talk and they're not often the same group. So getting people to sit still and talk about things they want to get on with and then find, actually you do come to a conclusion, allows you to be more…deliberate about which thing you're going to do rather than just something that someone is willing to do*.' (Interview 14)

However, coming back to the above comment by one interviewee that 'evaluation is scary', this points towards challenges around this project and the broader agenda of evaluating forms of eco-localisation. For one, there was evidence of some outright resistance to forms of M&E, in particular ones that might highlight shortcomings within the group, either in terms of tensions between members or perceived missing skills and constituents. For example:

> '*Because of the fear of negative consequences we chose not to use tools which were about internal capabilities and so on, and the fear is saying it's all hopeless, we haven't got what we need, we can't do it.'* (Interview 11).

Whilst this was not a prevalent sentiment, it does suggest that a potentially dispiriting mismatch exists between the changes some groups want to see in their communities and the world, and their abilities to create such change. From other interviews, there was

mention that trialling some of the 'group functioning' tools brought up 'unresolved issues' and opened 'a can of worms' that could not be remedied in one or a few groups meetings. These points highlight how assuming M&E to be a calculative and un-emotive exercise in, for example, totting up carbon savings or creating organisational business plans to prove financial sustainability, omits the often deeply personal and emotional connections individuals can have to their activities, their group and the broader reasons for their involvement. As such, asking group members to take a look at 'how they are doing' as a group is experienced by some as taking a perhaps too-detailed look at their own achievements and commitment, to the group and to their broader goals.

However, the fact that not all issues that arose could be remedied quickly should be automatically read as a negative outcome. That is, this project aimed to facilitate the *beginning* of groups' 'situated' and 'second order' learning. Debates about, for example, the 'skilling' of community groups stress the need for learning to be in line with their social and organizational contexts (e.g. Franklin et al., 2011). In reference to M&E in LCCGPs, these contexts include adopting tools that are relevant to a group at any particular point in time and the groups; 'life', at a suitable pace. This pace must include the appreciation that linking group discussions and learning about rationales, goals and assumptions to actual concrete practices and activities to take forward is not always a quick or linear process. One participant put it as follows:

> '*There have been one or two meetings where there has been some self-reflection on what we were doing and how we might work slightly differently…It was very pleasant and relaxed and that's a good thing but on the other hand it's not necessarily going to yield the kind of nitty-gritty information, to produce something that could really take you forward*.' (Interview 6)

Whilst this interviewee went on to state they would 'keep at it' in terms of working out what this 'nitty-gritty' information might look like fro them, this experience does suggest that groups may benefit from further support in linking up their 'second order' learning (ibid.) to clear strategies for further action. Whilst 'impact' tools such as the Participant Survey threw up less problematic issues within the groups, there were still questions about how they were going to turn key findings into action e.g. one group who found they were 'missing' the over-65s from their respondents were then not clear what to do about this.

Although much of the above is unsurprising and could be resolved within groups over time, the above points highlight a key issue at the heart of the 'impact agenda'. At first glance it may seem unproblematic that LCCGPs could (and do) by-pass some of the above challenges by acting as data collectors and conduits for national funding agencies. That is, filling out pro-formas that are passed up to external institutions for analysis and collation of collective impacts rather than viewing M&E as a reflective and reflexive process. However, as has already been argued, this procedure is far from satisfactory for many groups, as little data and learning stays with them (e.g. see Hobson et al., 2014). Yet such an approach remains the prevailing model attached to current funding streams (see above). What this knowledge exchange project thus underscores is that for the potential second order learning of M&E within groups to be realised more fully, providing core funding for LCCGPs or their intermediary networks to keep these M&E processes going themselves (e.g. employing someone part time or buying in external facilitation) will be vital. But, as the next section outlines, this funding should not be tied to overly stringent outcomes and timelines for undertaking M&E—an argument antithetical to current modes of competitive funding of LCCGPs in the UK.

### One size does not fit all: flexibility of tools and the aggregation of collective impacts

To return to the one of the main imperatives of this project, networks like TN face considerable challenges in facilitating and encouraging a broad array of group activities and projects, whilst trying to get a 'measure of the movement'. While TN can show the number of groups, events and projects that are part of Transition, it is less straightforward to show how they all contribute to greater socio-economic and environmental sustainability, due to numerous factors. These include the inherent difficulty of capturing long-term and/or 'human' impacts and assessing attribution. Is it then possible to provide a suite of tools that enables M&E to be relevant and helpful to LCCGPs current needs, whilst providing some information about of collective impacts?

As stated above, this project did not aim to collect or compare M&E data per se. Rather it aimed to explore what happens when LCCGPs endeavour to collect their own. Feedback from the trialling process with groups made it very apparent that, first and foremost, M&E tools and processes needed to be adaptable to groups' needs and capacities rather than forms of inflexible data collection methods. From the start, the project team made it clear to participants that their groups were able to make some alterations to the tools as they saw fit, as there was interest in the extent and types of changes groups felt they needed to make. Flexibility thus turned out to be key for some groups, as this interviewee noted:

> '*I'm pleased that we got to be able to modify them because I know you spent a lot of time drawing up the ones that would be one size fits all people, and it's good that you didn't make us stick to that but that actually we could modify them*.' (Interview 7)

While a few groups found these modifications relatively straightforward, others struggled with how the flexibility within the tools shifted the onus partially onto them, as they had to then work out how much they were able to alter the tools to accommodate their needs. For example:

> '*For us it was a little bit tortuous because the tools that we had weren't quite aligned to what I wanted to do. So obviously that's where we had the discussion with yourselves over the extent to which we could adjust the tools to meet our own individual needs*' (Interview 4).

For M&E tools that did not have much flexibility built into them, there were mixed reactions. For example, the Community Impact Monitoring Tool (CIMT) could provide comparable information, as it models and estimates certain outcomes and impacts from project activities and events, including carbon emissions, cost savings and waste diverted from landfill. Participating groups had access to this tool during the trials, inputting their data from various activities and receiving an info-graphics report that calculated resources saved. Some stated that the report represented a powerful visual aid '*that you can show people and say, look, here it is, this is us'* (Interview 5). For others the data the tool requires was either not feasible (in terms of ability to collect it) or not desirable (in terms of it not examining social impacts). For the Participant Survey, groups were able (with the help of the project team using SurveyMonkey) to choose questions from a template, to explore a range of issue in their wider community. The project team were able to view returned questionnaire data, enabling evaluation of the questions chosen by groups and thus how much comparable data was generated. From this, the questions all trialling groups chose to include were ones about relationship/involvement in the group, including motivation(s); attitudes towards the group; actions, or intentions to take action in relation to group activities; and demographic information. As such, some comparable data was generated on community perceptions and involvements in groups, but little on the (perceived) impacts group activities are having on respondents' practices: arguably a key piece of information if LCCGPs wish to make claims about the affects of their activities on their communities and beyond.

This then raises fundamental questions about the work one expects M&E tools to do. For most groups, who were focussed first and foremost on their own activities, this lack of comparability across groups did not present a major challenge or drawback. However, for the one group that surveyed a collection of smaller local projects, this did prove problematic. As the interviewee from this group commented:

> '*It's hard because I know that the tools need to be generic for different groups and all different groups have slightly different focuses, but we did find that some of the titles, in both tools, were open to interpretation. So what we needed to do was to put our own interpretation on them which, in terms of getting results back from many people…you might get slightly different variations of themes'* (Interview 7).

This then highlights a clear question about the role that M&E, group learning, and questions of impact plays for groups, intermediary networks like TN and LCCN, and policy makers. That is, each constituency comes to the ideas and practices of M&E with different imperatives and goals that—although they overlap—are not directly commensurable. This project thus highlighted how both prevailing 'top down' model of M&E as evaluating public R&D labs, and a more 'bottom up' approach of facilitating groups' own M&E learning, have (very different) drawbacks. What then should and/or could our expectations be of the role that M&E can play, in fostering forms of eco-localisation or 'progressive localism' (ibid.)? And how can forms of 'situated learning', that nevertheless has some shared features and comparable outputs, be facilitated in communities and amongst intermediary networks that are already over-stretched, in terms of time, people and financial/material resources?

## What has M&E ever done for us? Practices, politics and the role of intermediary networks

This papers' knowledge exchange project was funded for 12 months. As such, little can be said about the types and impacts of new activities that arose as a result of groups' participation in the trials, as these were still works in progress when this project ended. In that sense, whether undertaking M&E results in groups' having greater socio-environmental impacts in their communities remains an open question, and one that is ripe for follow-up. However—in addition to the comments above about rethinking group assumptions and direction—it was clear that participating groups were now more amenable to undertaking forms of group learning and keeping certain M&E practices in place. As one group put it '*The surveying, we'll definitely be keeping that…*'*we can incorporate some into our everyday activities quite easily*' (Interview 5). Of course, the affect this collected data has on subsequent practices depends on how it is utilised by groups. Indeed, as one interviewee commented, when describing their attempts to analyze data generated through the M&E trials *'We did have the skills but were limited by capacity. The volunteers work really hard. We ran out of time and effort to a degree'* (Interview 5). Towards the end of this project, all parties raised questions about how the positive experiences of 20 trial groups could be repeated elsewhere, as without more widespread uptake of M&E tools and processes the work done here would arguably have little impact outside of immediate participants. Indeed, it was the very existence of this project that encouraged some groups to 'have a go' at M&E, as such opportunities were reported to be rare for LLCGPs. For example, several project participants noted that they very likely would not have participated if there had not been a package of financial, training and in-person support provided by this project:

> '*What's valuable is somebody saying actually if you can be bothered to participate in this, we'll give you some support and some guidance on the sort of tools that are available which otherwise, if it's just the fact it's a website, what is the incentive for somebody to think, that might bring some benefits but we don't know?*' (Interview 14).

How such support and guidance could be extended under conditions of severe resource constraints for LCCGPs and networks gave rise to some creative thinking. One group suggested running shorter 'taster' sessions, followed up by some high quality online resources that, for example, take groups through the uses and implementation and analysis of various M&E tools. Regional mentoring hubs were also suggested, as was group-to-group M&E, where neighbouring LLCGPs support and evaluate each other over time in a joint learning environment. Interventions like the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change's proposed 'Community Energy Hub'—an online site that aims to share resources and connect groups—were generally not evaluated positively when mentioned at all, as such sites were considered unable to provide the tailored guidance that groups need.

And such opinions appear inextricably tied up with concerns about the ways that groups' aims and activities can become distorted through involvement in centralised funding programmes. As one interviewee put it, when talking about attempts to align their group's agenda with that of funders:

> '*It is about the kind of social fabric that you're building there and enabling the knowledge but it's very difficult to put that in DECC speak*' (Interview 7).

Indeed, there was clear determination amongst one group in particular, not to take up the mantle of becoming a well-funded and expansive group, able to deliver on national

level policy goals and prove their impact to attract competitive external funding. Rather, they were clear that remaining at their current size and doing projects that were of interest to them—not ones that delivered the most quantifiable impacts—was their intended pathway. As the interviewee from this group commented:

> '*We don't have at the moment any major ambitions to bring in lots of money to do big projects. We've succeeded in the past at getting manageable amounts of money, like a few hundreds here and there, just to do stuff that we're interested in but it's really small scale. That's pretty much all we can really manage*.' (Interview 1)

This comment pulls the focus back to the debates about localism and localisation that opened this paper. Featherstone et al. (2012: 177) for one have argued—in reaction to the discourses and policies of the New Localist agenda—that researchers needs to 'engage with struggles over the terms of debate around localism and to contribute to strategies of collective resistance'. Although it would be somewhat hyperbolical to claim M&E as a practice of collective resistance vis-à-vis strategies such as overt and public protests, it is not without political potency, if we understand politics here as intentionally addressing the perceived wrongs of the status quo and building alternatives. For one, it can be a way to position LCCGPs as effective and legitimate actors within the public sphere. As one interviewee put it:

> '*There's a lot of political process that goes on in our group, that side of things is strong, and the M&E really ballasts that and gives it this solidity*' (Interview 10)

Thus, M&E can have an overtly strategic function in a way that is not just about 'playing the game' of funders. Rather, it is about using certain representations of impact to gain entry into spheres of influence that may enable groups' ethos and aims to gain further public traction with the public or other stakeholders: in the quote above, it was access to

key local government decision makers. In addition, M&E can stimulate conversations that enable groups to think about and work towards countering some of the criticisms levelled at them within the extant literature i.e. that they are apolitical, parochial and/or self-interested groups and individuals. For example, while the Roles Mapping tool could be viewed as a simple exercise in 'who does what', M&E trial participants found it evoked deeper and more considered debate about institutional and societal distribution of responsibilities and capacities for positive socio-environmental change. This in turn raised questions about groups' roles and capacities within existing landscapes of governance and power—questions some groups felt able to translate into action through the creation of new projects, whilst others struggled to connect these broader debates to discrete and feasible actions.

## Conclusions

The institutions, means and scales at which pressing issues like climate change and peak oil are addressed have notably diversified in recent decades. This diversification has included a growing number of community-led projects and programmes, sparking debate about the roles and responsibilities of such sites and collectives in addressing such a panoply of issues. This paper has drawn on different approaches to how these roles and responsibilities are conceptualised and enacted, outlining (an undoubtedly overly simplistic) distinction between forms of localism—as seen in discourse of the UK Government in recent years—and forms of localisation, which some argue are typified by the work of movements like Transition. Drawing on a 1-year knowledge exchange project, this paper explored if, and in what ways, M&E processes and tools—often aligned with top-down policy imperatives and funding requirements, as suggested by DECC's Community Energy Strategy—can be a constructive part of eco-localisation agendas.

In doing so, we have outlined how groups involved in this knowledge exchange project reported mostly positive experiences, although the length of the project in relation to the 'cans of worms' some tools opened was problematic for a few, underscoring the need for forms of ongoing support (as well as issues with the length of funding for knowledge exchange projects). In addition, finding a balance between M&E tailored to groups' learning needs, and the ability of intermediaries to aggregate cross-community learning, remains a challenge. For TN and LCCN, there is a fine line to walk between leaving their network open to encourage a diversity of groups and people: and finding ways of asking 'how are we doing?' as a dispersed collective of people and groups hoping to have notable impacts on systems that transcend particular places i.e. food and economic systems. Both TN and LCCN have experience in conducting surveys of their member groups and have found incentivising groups to participate an issue. However, M&E that is constructive for a group, relatively 'light touch' (Hobson et al., 2014) and even at times fun, can encourage groups to feel part of a broader goal and narrative, and hopefully to 'check in' with the network on a regular basis, as with TN's Group Diagnostic tool.

Finally, this project raised several questions worthy of further exploration. For one, does a more 'bottom up' M&E methodology give rise to more effective projects, in relations to particular groups goals and the broader goals of networks and movements? How can complex but vital social impacts—as we attempted to explore in the 'cost effectiveness' and equity impacts tools, only trialled by one group due to the time, data and skills involved—be translated in M&E tools accessible and useable to a wide range of low carbon and Transition groups? And how can the broader knowledge exchange and impact agenda be further shaped and funded to foster initiatives such as LCCGPs? In doing so, one goal needs to be helping LCCGPs to further hone their 'conceptual' toolkits, and link such 'internal' learning to affect and saliency 'on the ground' : a move which this paper

has argued is crucial if the recent interest in LCCGPs impacts is to support, not stymie, their diverse goals and activities.

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